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No. 3 C.I.A. Official Called A Likely Successor to Inman

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WASHINGTON, April 25 — President Reagan plans to appoint John N. McMahon, executive director of the Central Intelligence Agency, to the No. 2 job in the agency, replacing Adm. Bobby R. Inman, who resigned last week, intelligence sources said today.

Mr. McMahon, who presently holds the No. 3 job in the agency, is a 52-year-old career officer who has spent more than 30 years at the C.I.A. Officials at the agency and on Capitol Hill said that he has worked in virtually all areas of the agency, including the operational and scientific side.

Mr. McMahon's scheduled appointment as Deputy Director of Central Intelligence under William J. Casey, the Director, follows Admiral Inman's resignation Wednesday. That was tied, in part, to a possible reorganization of counterintelligence operations, according to Administration officials. Admiral Inman, who was popular on Capitol Hill, opposed that review, fearing it might lead to a consolidation of counterintelligence responsibility in a new and powerful organization with authority to collect information in the United States.

A ranking Administration official said today that President Reagan had planned to delay the selection of Admiral Inman's successor. But the expressions of concern by Senator Richard G. Lugar, Republican of Indiana, a member of the Select Committee on Intelligence, about the impact of Admiral Inman's resignation led Mr. Reagan to expedite the appointment.

Although several Senators on the committee declined today to discuss the details of Mr. McMahon's scheduled promotion to the job of Deputy Director of the C.I.A., the official was lauded for his experience and skill. The appointment will face Senate confirmation.

'A First-Rate Pro'

"He's a first-rate pro, highly regarded," said Senator Henry M. Jackson, Democrat of Washington. "He's been through the hoop at the agency, knows the ins and outs, has a good technical background and knows the broad policy issues." The appointment "should help strengthen the morale in the intelligence community," Mr. Jackson said. The Senator, who spoke on the phone from his home in Washington, would not identify Mr. McMahon as the candidate even though he commented on his qualities at length.

Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Democrat of New York, vice chairman of the committee, said: "Mr. McMahon was the only, and I repeat, only, appointment I would have found acceptable."

Intelligence sources said that the only other serious contender for the job was Gen. Lew Allen Jr., Chief of Staff of the Air Force. The sources said that President Reagan and Mr. Casey felt it was important to name an experienced C.I.A. official quickly to blunt the controversy stirred by Mr. Inman's resignation. Beyond this, officials said the Administration wanted to avoid a possible Senate fight over the nomination. At this point, officials say, the Administration expects the Senate to approve Mr. McMahon without difficulty.

Reached in Massena, N.Y., near Watertown, where he was campaigning for re-election, Senator Moynihan said the committee had had a "troubled 16-month relationship" with the Reagan Administration over some of its C.I.A. appointments, notably that of Max C. Hugel. Mr. Hugel was chief of clandestine operations at the agency until last July when he resigned in the wake of allegations that he had participated in fraudulent securities transactions when he managed an electronics business in the 1970's. He denied the allegations.

The committee looked with extra reliance on Admiral Inman because he was a nonpolitical and professional intelligence officer," Senator Moynihan said. "Frankly, we would not have been able to accept someone either from the political world or the military world who had no real intelligence experience."

Senator Moynihan said of Mr. McMahon: "I do not anticipate any problem with his appointment."

Senator Jackson said that he expected the White House to announce the appointment Monday, a point on which White House officials declined to comment.

Held Agency Science Posts

Mr. McMahon has held his current job as executive director of the C.I.A. since Jan. 4. Essentially, the job involves running the day-to-day operations of the agency. Mr. McMahon's recent jobs have included deputy director of the National Foreign Assessment Center, the agency's analytical branch. In the mid-1970's, he was deputy director for operations, and he has also served in science and technology posts in his 31 years at the C.I.A.

Stanley Sporkin, the agency's general counsel, said in a telephone interview today that Mr. McMahon was a "very fine, very solid, extremely smart person who knows the business." Mr. Sporkin described Mr. McMahon as a "very good administrator and very effective person."

Admiral Inman's resignation was apparently prompted by a number of clashes with the White House and sharpening disagreement over the direction of the Administration's policies on intelligence-gathering and foreign affairs. Earlier this year President Reagan approved the proposal to conduct a comprehensive review of counterintelligence policy and reorganization. This review was opposed by Admiral Inman. Administration officials said, partly out of concern that it would open the way for a new, and unnecessary, organization to deal with counterintelligence.